God speaks within: from mystical vision to devout listening

George Pattison[1]

Abstract
In the Bible, the human God-relationship is typically established through and by the phenomenon of 'calling'. However, for much subsequent theology, this has been displaced by 'vision', 'taste' or 'feeling'. Referring to the notion of an inner word, the paper follows Kierkegaard's treatment of silence as, alternatively, a mode of inattention and attention to such an inner word. With Heidegger, the paper turns to the notion of vocation, both as in the discussion of the call of conscience in *Being and Time* and the poetic vocation exemplified in the figure and poetry of Hölderlin. Finally, it considers the possible difference between such a poetic vocation and a divine calling.

Introduction

As we shall see in more detail, the idea that the way in which God communicates with human beings is a kind of speaking is deeply rooted in the Bible and in Christian tradition. On this view, Christian life is essentially a response to the divine calling. However, the modern experience of God, or, more precisely, of God's absence, renders this model problematic. Indeed, on Kierkegaard's analysis of the present age, human speech is itself caught up in a process of progressive degradation. For all his distance from 'the crowd', the Kierkegaardian aesthete provides a clear statement of the view that, in the end, speech is indistinguishable from cosmic noise. In this situation, we follow Kierkegaard himself in seeking a renewed sense of God as speaking through a deepening of the experience of silence and (to paraphrase T. S. Eliot) thereby purifying the quality of our attention. But is this enough for us to speak of 'hearing' God?

A parallel venture seems to be found in Heidegger's resort to 'calling' as a means of renewing philosophical enquiry. Like Kierkegaard, Heidegger summons us to a deeper attention to the calling that is given in the very structure of human Dasein. However, in *Being and Time*, this call (described as the call of conscience) seems to imply no caller and no specific content other than that which is given to it by Dasein itself. But if there is no one who calls, then the very idea of calling seems to have been reduced to an empty metaphor. This model seems to be changed in Heidegger's later treatment of poetic vocation. Here it seems as if we are really talking about vocation, as in the Hölderlinian image of the poet as one called by the gods. However, a closer analysis shows that here too calling is a way of

[1] I have developed the themes in this paper with wider reference to further aspects of Scripture, philosophy of language, ethics, and prosaics in my *A Rhetorics of the Word. A Philosophy of Christian Life Part 2* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

speaking about human beings' abandonment and that we have no basis to suppose that our sense of being called implies the existence of one who calls.

The paper concludes, then, that whilst both Kierkegaard and Heidegger seem to offer a certain rediscovery of the sense of calling, this may be anthropologically suggestive, but of itself it does not go far enough to justify or to reinstate a fully theological idea of vocation.

Calling in Scripture and Tradition

'Samuel, Samuel!' As in God's first call to the child Samuel (1 Sam 3.4), it is often the case that the divine approach takes the form of verbal address. This seems appropriate when the prophetic task is itself the delivery of a word from God to the people. At the same time, the Hebrew Bible testifies to a range of divine communicative practices, from the burning bush, through Amos's almond branch, to Daniel's dreams and visions. Yet whatever their form their primary function is to be the occasion for articulating a 'word of the Lord'. The issue then is how we are to listen that we might hear – and hearing understand – that word.

In the course of Christian history, however, this biblical emphasis on the word seems to have been lost or, at least, diminished in favour of a more pronounced emphasis on vision. From the early Church through to the modern period, the literature of Christian spirituality has repeatedly privileged vision as the ultimate mode in which human beings might know God. Thus, the question that engages Thomas Aquinas is whether it is possible to have a vision of God, *visio Dei*, in this life; and although he concludes that it is not, it is just such a vision of God that will make up the content of our final fulfilment in heaven. Of course, this visual emphasis is already implicit in the New Testament, as when Paul writes that we see God now in an obscure reflection ('as in a glass, darkly') but will then see face to face (1 Cor. 13.12) or when the visible radiance of the divine glory is highlighted in the story of the Transfiguration. However, this visualizing tendency is extended in the ascetic literature of the early Church, in which the goal of Christian spiritual life is contemplation, translating the Greek *theoria*. In other words, the goal of Christian asceticism is, simply, to contemplate or to gaze upon God to the extent that such a thing is possible for human beings in this life. This both reflects and enhances the influence of earlier Greek, especially Platonic, conceptions of the philosophical ascent from the confused shadows of sense-experience towards a direct vision of the sun of divine truth. Even when the limits of vision were acknowledged, these could themselves be dealt with in visual imagery, as when Dionysius speaks of the 'dazzling darkness' of the divine presence.

This is not to say that vision monopolized the field of spiritual practice. In addition to a continuing (but now minority) emphasis on vision, ‘taste’ was another sense popular in ascetic theology, often associated with the false etymology that connected the Latin *sapor*, savour, with sapientia, wisdom. In the modern period, this transmutes also into 'feeling', as in Schleiermacher's Second Speech on religion, or, as Schleiermacher himself specifies, that moment in mental life that is prior to the split between feeling and intuition and that is described as 'a taste for the infinite' or a ‘music’ that should accompany life. Also often favoured was touch, not least in the especially intimate form of touch experienced in kissing, a key element in mystical interpretations of the Song of Songs, one of the most important biblical points of reference for medieval spiritual practice.

We should not suppose that these were mutually exclusive. The ecstatic experience that Augustine shared with his mother Monica at Ostia seems to have involved both visionary and gustatory elements. As he writes 'Yes, we soared higher yet, by inward musing, and discoursing upon thee, and by admiring of thy works; and last of all, we came to our own souls, which we presently went beyond, so that we advanced as high as that region of never-wasting plenty, whence thou feedest Israel for ever with the food of truth, and where life is that wisdom by which all these things are made, both which have been and which are to come'.[2] Also striking in this passage is that it seems to echo the Platonic ascent described in Phaedrus, in which the souls that reach the highest level of spiritual vision are also described as feeding: 'There abides the very being with which true knowledge is concerned; the colourless, formless, intangible essence, visible only to mind, the pilot of the soul. The divine intelligence, being nurtured upon mind and pure knowledge, and the intelligence of every soul which is capable of receiving the food proper to it, rejoices at beholding reality, and once more gazing upon truth, is replenished and made glad, until the revolution of the worlds brings her round again to the same place.'[3]

However we evaluate these images of spiritual sensation, they all seem to set a limit to the powers of language with regard to knowledge of God. Gregory of Nyssa’s (332-95) *Life of Moses* offers a particularly telling comment on this. Like other mystical interpretations of scripture (including that of Dionysius), Gregory figures Moses’ ascent of Mount Sinai as an allegory of the soul’s ascent to knowledge of God. Accordingly, he writes: ‘For leaving behind everything that is observed, not only what sense comprehends but also what the intelligence thinks it sees, it keeps on penetrating deeper until by the intelligence’s yearning it

[2] Augustine, *Confessions*, 9.10.
[3] Plato, *Phaedrus*, 247.3.c-d.

gains access to the invisible and incomprehensible, and there it sees God. This is the true knowledge of what is sought; this is the seeing that is not seeing, because that which is sought transcends all knowledge, being separated on all sides by a kind of darkness'.[4] To which he adds 'When Moses arrived there, he was taught by word what he had formerly learned from darkness, so that. I think, the doctrine on this matter ought to be made firmer for us being testified to by the divine voice'.[5] The point could scarcely be made more clearly, namely, that the word is essentially ancillary to vision and that it is vision, even the kind of vision that is 'not seeing' that is primary.

'Vision' is not the sole metaphor in the Christian mystics' thesaurus. Another is taste or even smell and a much used etymology connects the Latin *sapientia* (wisdom, as in 'divine wisdom') with *sapor* (savour or scent). But whether it is a matter of vision, touch, taste, or smell, it seems that God is beyond language. This is a key element in traditions of negative or apophatic theology as well as relating to a penchant for silence in spiritual writing. These (negative theology and silence) may have a certain affinity but they are not identical.[6] Negative theology is, after all, still an operation on and in language whereas silence is, quite simply, the suspension of language and, qua silence, is experienced as a sufficient and appropriate response to God. And it is on silence that I wish to concentrate here.

François de Sales illustrates the point when he speaks of the divine and human lovers just being together in the secret, wordless enjoyment of each other's being.[7] In itself there is nothing 'negative' or apophatic about this. Still less does it imply the absence or non-presence of God, a major theme of recent discussions of negative theology. On the contrary, if negative theology is taken as indicative of the impossibility of divine presence, the lovers' silence assumes the reality of presence. It is because they are present to each other that they no longer need to speak. 'Love does not speak only with the tongue,' writes de Sales, 'but also with the eyes, with sighs, and in the face'.[8]

---

[4] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. A. J. Malherbe and E. Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978)
[5] Ibid.
[6] The tendency to conflate silence and apophaticism is evident in the title and several of the essays in Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (eds.) *Silence and the Word. Negative Theology and Incarnation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
[7] A useful anthology on the theme of silence is William Franke's two-volume *On What Cannot be Said : Apophatic discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts. Volume 1, Classic Formulations, Volume 2, Modern and Contemporary Transformations* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2007). As Franke points out, silence does not only cover the kind of wondering adoration we are considering here, but may also relate to situations of God's experienced absence, as in the poetry of Paul Celan. Such silence is also a theme in the poetry of the Welsh poet R. S. Thomas. See Richard MacLauchlan, *Saturday's Silence. R. S. Thomas and Paschal Reading* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2016) for an illuminating discussion.
[8] François de Sales, *Traitté de l'amour de Dieu* in *Œuvres de Saint François de Sales*, vol. 4 (Annecy: Niérat, 1894), 6.1.

It is tempting to interpret this being together of the human and divine lovers as a kind of experience, along the lines of the ineffable experience of God of which James so eloquently spoke. However, de Sales himself also draws attention to aspects of this being together that do not entirely fit the Jamesian model. What is decisive is the conformity of will between divine and human so that the main thing is the simple will to do or to live in accord with the will of God, the desire to desire what God desires, whether or not this is accompanied by any particular experience or feeling. In this spirit de Sales recommends to Philothea (the addressee of his Introduction to the Devout Life) that she remembers the teaching of Angela of Foligno that the prayer that is most acceptable to God is the prayer that we don't want to pray, that arouses no pleasure, that we make ourselves pray, and that we pray solely because we know it is pleasing to God.[9]

An eloquent illustration of this is de Sales' own parable of the deaf lutanist. Imagine, he says, that there was once a supremely gifted lutanist and singer, so renowned that he is summoned by his prince to play and sing for the royal pleasure. As a true subject, nothing gives him greater joy than to dedicate the service of his gift to the prince. However, as time goes on he becomes so completely deaf that he himself can no longer hear the music he performs. Nevertheless, he continues to be rejoice in the fact that by singing and playing he is able to give pleasure to his prince. But now the prince decides to amuse himself hunting. Still, as he sets out, he commands the musician to continue singing and playing, even in his absence. Now the musician can no longer hear the music he makes, nor is the one for whom he is playing there to hear it. And yet his joy undiminished since, even though no one hears, he is doing all that he has ever wished to do, namely, to be faithful to his Lord's will.[10]

Silence, in this perspective, would seem to mean essentially and primarily the simple acceptance of the divine will that is also, implicitly, the simple acceptance of oneself, as one is, as (in a believer's perspective) God made one to be. But does this then mean that language has become entirely otiose?

Fénelon, a spiritual writer strongly influenced by de Sales and endorsing the main points of Salesian spirituality, spoke explicitly of the 'inner word'. 'It is certain', he says, 'that the Spirit of God dwells within us, there acts, there prays without ceasing, there desires, there asks what we ourselves don't know to ask, pushes us, animates us, speaks to us in the silence, suggesting all truth to us, uniting us in such a way to him that we are of but one spirit

[9] François de Sales, trans. Michael Day, *Introduction to the Devout Life* (London: Burns and Oates, 1962), 4.14.
[10] François de Sales, *Traitté de l'amour*, 9.9.

with God'.[11] A recent commentator, Mino Bergamo, has suggested that this teaching on the inner word is the decisive contribution of the 17th century 'French School'.[12]

Of course, this was not an entirely novel doctrine and if Christian spiritual writing of earlier centuries spoke of the vision of God or the kiss of God it is also rich in dialogues between the soul and God. Yet there may be significant cultural reasons for why, just at this time when Cartesianism becomes established as a key to the new science, religious thought turns away from vision and intuition to other ways of modelling the divine-human relationship, amongst them the 'inner word'.

Now Fenelon does not suppose that this inner word speaks to us in the same way that the Word of the Lord came to Isaiah, Jeremiah and the other prophets with verbal formulae that the prophets were to repeat to the people. To become capable of hearing this word we must bring about a transformation of the self. As Fenelon writes 'we must quieten ourselves so as to listen in the profound silence of the entire soul this ineffable voice of the bride. We must lend our ears, since it is a sweet and delicate voice which is heard only by those who no longer hear the rest', i.e., all the other voices by which the world engages our attention, seduces, and diverts us away from the way of devotion.[13] Nor will we hear it if we immediately set about translating what it is saying into some rationally-ordered discourse. God speaks to the enlightened, the savants, not less than to the rest of us, but they are prone 'to turn everything into reason, one has recourse to the principles of natural wisdom and the methods of prudence, of everything except what would come to us in an infinitely better way by means of simplicity and docility towards the Spirit of God'. 'We know everything—but without knowing anything', as Fénelon comments.[14]

Perhaps, after all, this 'inner word' is itself only a metaphor for what is better described in terms of feeling? But what is exactly at stake here? Why should it matter whether divine reality is primarily revealed to us as word, flavour, or vision? Does whichever mode of relationship we privilege really affect the fundamental philosophical issues regarding the possibility of human beings having a God-relationship? Don't the same polarities of created/ uncreated, finite/ infinite, conditioned/ unconditioned, temporal/ eternal come into play in each case, bringing with them the same perennial and insoluble problems?

---

[11] François de Salignac de la Mothe Fénelon, (ed. J. Le Brun), *Oeuvres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), vol. 1, pp. 589-90.
[12] Mino Bergamo, *L'anatomia dell'anima da François de Sales à Fénelon* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1991), p. 13.
[13] Fénelon, *Œuvres*, vol. 1, p. 590.
[14] Fénelon, *Œuvres*, vol. 1, p. 594.

What, if anything, is distinctive about the 'word' character of divine communication in comparison with touch, taste, or vision?

One obvious answer is that the word, language, is precisely the way in which human beings develop, articulate, and communicate their understanding of themselves and their world. Another, closely related to this, is that language is a means of communication unique to and distinctive of personal beings. When I speak, I suppose that the one to whom I am speaking is one capable of hearing and understanding what I am saying; likewise, when I hear something being said to me, I suppose that the source of that saying is also a personal being such as I believe myself to be. The identification of 'word' as the category of divine communication par excellence is therefore an implicit affirmation of the claim that the God with whom we have to do in spiritual life is a personal God (whatever we more precisely mean by that).

However, although there have been influential currents of modern theology that have their point of departure in the Word of God (as in Karl Barth's 'theology of the Word of God'), it seems that the dominant experience of modernity implies the absence or unintelligibility of such a Word. This is indirectly acknowledged by Barthian theology's own insistence that the divine Word is indeed unintelligible in terms of worldly criteria of meaningfulness. Although such theologies have attracted their supporters, it seems also worthwhile to see what, if anything, in the modern experience might make it possible for us to understand ourselves as 'hearers of the Word'. I shall therefore dedicate the remainder of this paper to looking at what that means *ex negativo*, specifically by exploring what we can learn about the 'word' character of divine communication from those experiences of God or of ultimate reality that are marked not by speech but by silence. In particular I shall focus on Kierkegaard and Heidegger, two thinkers whose reception became deeply intertwined in the mid-twentieth century. As elsewhere, what they say on this question reveals significant shared horizons but no less significant divergences, especially with regard to the destiny of Christianity in the modern world. Both, as we shall see, emphasize the category of calling as a fundamental anthropological feature, but both leave unresolved the question as what or who is calling.

Language and Silence in Kierkegaard

We can learn something of what is at stake here from Kierkegaard's essay 'Shadowgraphs'. Here he has his unnamed aesthetic writer A address his fellow 'symparanekromenoi' as follows.

> ... let us keep quiet for a moment and listen to the music of the storm, its impudent course, its bold summons, and to the defiant bellow of the sea, the wood's anxious sighs, the trees' despairing crashing, and the grass's cowardly whisper? People rightly say that the divine voice is not in the rushing wind but in the gentle breeze—but our ears are not formed to catch gentle breezes; instead they are [formed] to drink up elemental noise. And why should [the storm] not break forth more powerfully still and make an end of life and of the world and of this short speech, which has at least the advantage over all the rest that it soon comes to an end.[15]

This philosophy postulates the origin of the world in a blind and purposeless vortex, a restatement of ancient atomism in post-Romantic mood in which all there really is beyond the tapestry of human speech is 'elemental noise'. The world is essentially 'silent', word-less, in the specific sense that no matter how much ever gets said none of it means anything at all—sound and fury signifying silence. This lack of fundamental meaning is most immediately and evidently present in the ineluctable death to which all life, inclusive of all human life, irreversibly tends.

And if the Kierkegaardian aesthete presents this vision in a way that exerts a certain seductive fascination, the later development of his authorship suggests that a similar nihilism lies behind the average everydayness of modern petit bourgeois life. In the 1846 analysis of 'The Present Age', Kierkegaard characterizes this age in terms of its all-encompassing 'chatter', a non-stop stream of spoken and printed words dragging discourse towards ever greater formlessness, superficiality, and the levelling out of all substantial differences and distinctions. 'And just as the public is a pure abstraction so too will human speech finally become [an abstraction]. There will no longer be anyone who talks but an objective reflection will gradually produce an atmospheric something, an abstract noise that will make all human speech superfluous, just as machines make workers superfluous.'[16] And if the Kierkegaardian aesthete enjoys a kind of rapture of the abyss, the chatterers 'dread the moment of silence that will reveal the emptiness', that is, reveal the fact that, in the end, they have nothing really to say for themselves.[17]

On this view, both the aesthetes and the modern bourgeois live in a world that is ultimately silent, a world in which whoever or whatever God may be, He is not a God who

---

[15] Søren Kierkegaard, *Enten-Eller* 1 in *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, vol. 2, (Copenhagen: Gad, 1997), p. 166; trans. H. V. and E. H. Hong, Either/Or I (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 168.
[16] Søren Kierkegaard, *En Literair Anmeldelse* in *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, vol. 8 (Copenhagen: Gad, 2004), pp. 98-9; trans. H. V. and E. H. Hong, *Two Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 104.
[17] Ibid., p. 93 (E. Trans., p. 98).

speaks - or not in such a way that human beings can understand. But as in the logic that declares despair to be the only antidote to despair, the most effective antidote to an age that is marked by metaphysical silence is to become silent, a strategy that Kierkegaard addresses most fully in an 1849 discourse entitled, simply, 'Silence', a discourse that offers further variations on his now well-established theme of the lilies and the birds.

Kierkegaard begins by acknowledging the difficulty of relating to God in the mode of speech, not least when we, like everybody else, are habitual 'chatterers':

> God is in heaven and we are on earth and therefore we cannot easily talk together. God is love and human beings—as one says to a child and maybe even for its benefit—are little rascals, therefore they cannot easily talk together. … The person who knows how to pray knows this and those who don't know how to pray might perhaps learn this by praying. Perhaps there was something that was very much on your mind, something that was so important to you, something that made it so pressing for you to explain yourself to God that it made you afraid of forgetting some detail and then, if you had forgotten anything, you were afraid that God would not Himself be able to remember it—and so you focused your mind on praying with real inwardness. And what happened then, if you did indeed pray with real inwardness? Something wonderful. For as you prayed more and more inwardly, you had less and less to say, and finally you became entirely silent. You became silent and, if it is possible that there is something even more opposed to speaking than silence, you became a listener. You had thought that praying was about speaking: you learned that praying is not merely keeping silent but is listening. That is how it is. Praying is not listening to oneself speak, but is about becoming silent and, in becoming silent, waiting, until the one who prays hears God.[18]

Practically, Kierkegaard suggests that a first step towards learning silence might be to go out into nature and to be alone with the 'lilies and the birds' referred to in the Sermon on the Mount, away from the city, away from the crowd and its endless chatter. Is, this, then a Christian reworking of a Romantic nature philosophy: is it to nature and to its 'thousand voices' that we are to attend when we have grown silent? Is it nature's own silence that we are here engaged in interiorizing? But if this is so, what then is the difference between this 'godly' approach to nature's silence and that of the aesthete? Why should we find anything in

[18] Søren Kierkegaard, *Lilien paa Marken og Fuglen under Himlen* in *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, vol. 11 (Copenhagen: Gad, 2006), p. 17; E. trans.from G. Pattison, ed. and trans. *Kierkegaard's Spiritual Writings* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), p. 185.

nature other than 'elemental noise', even if perhaps very beautiful elemental noise? The difference is that it is neither to the voice of nature nor to the silence of nature that we are to listen when we have once arrived 'out there'. Silence is indeed everywhere in nature. As Kierkegaard writes

> Out there it is silent, and not only when everything falls silent in the silence of night but also when the day is stirring as through a thousand chords and everything is like an ocean of sound, even then it is silent out there. Every single creature plays its part so well that not one of them, not all of them together, disturb this solemn silence. Out there it is silent. The wood is silent—and even when it whispers, it is silent. Even where the trees are most thickly clustered together they keep their word to each other and keep what is said to themselves … The sea is silent—and even when it roars and is full of noise it is nevertheless silent …[19]

Yet this silence reveals something that is neither mere silence nor speech, namely, the silence of the creature in a relation of adoration vis-à-vis its creator.

> [W]hat does this silence express? It expresses reverence for God and the fact that He is the One who governs and it is to Him alone that wisdom and understanding belong. And it is precisely because this silence reverences God and, in a manner proper to nature, worships Him, that it is so solemn. And it is because this silence is thus solemn that it is possible to sense God in nature—and so it is no wonder that everything keeps silent out of reverence for Him. Even if *He* does not speak, the fact that everything keeps silent out of reverence for Him affects one as if He were speaking.[20]

At this point we note that there is a difference between silence and silence, a difference well-observed by Jean-Louis Chrétien when he notes that there is a radical difference between the silence of the philosophical mystic in face of the impersonal absolute and the silence of the believer waiting on a God who, it is supposed, has something to say, a God to whom speech, the Word, is not alien. The silence of the devout Christian is, on this understanding, a silence of listening and attention--and perhaps (we may add) an appropriate mode of response.[21] In these terms, Kierkegaard's silence is not a matter of language in favour of the silence of nature but of using the silence of nature to become capable of hearing and speaking at another level.

---

[19] Kierkegaard, *Lilien paa Marken*, pp. 18-9 (E. trans., pp. 186-7).
[20] Kierkegaard, *Lilien paa Marken*, p. 22 (E. trans. p. 191).
[21] See J.-L. Chrétien, tr. A. Brown, *The Ark of Speech* (London: Routledge, 2004), 39.

> And, in silence, may [the gospel] lead you to forget yourself, forget what you yourself are called, forget your own name, whether it is a renowned or an ignominious or an insignificant name, in order silently to pray to God, 'hallowed be *Your* name'! And, in silence, may it bring you to forget yourself, your plans, whether they are great schemes that encompass everything or so narrow as only to concern yourself and your future, in order to silently pray to God, '*Your* Kingdom come'. And, in silence, may it bring you to forget your will, your willfulness, in order to silently pray '*Your* will be done'[22]

Silence issues in a word, in this case the word of prayer that we know as the Lord's Prayer. If a certain model of Christian contemplation moves from verbal prayer to mental prayer to silence, the movement of Kierkegaardian prayer is nearly the opposite as it moves from silence to being able to speak to and, I suggest, with God.

Yet we should not be too literal. It is not a question of filling the silence with words. In the context of language, silence itself is significant, a part of speech, like De Sales lovers, alone on silent understanding. This is a point well made by Thomas Merton, one of the most influential spiritual writers in the modern Catholic traditions. Merton writes:

> The true contemplative is not the one who prepares his mind for a particular message that he wants or expects to hear, but who remains empty because he knows that he can never expect or anticipate the word that will transform his darkness into light. He does not even anticipate a special kind of transformation. He does not demand light instead of darkness. He waits on the Word of God in silence, and when he is "answered," it is not so much by a word that bursts into his silence. It is by his silence itself suddenly, inexplicably revealing itself to him as a word of great power, full of the voice of God.[23]

In these terms, we need not expect the inner voice to have the character of an audition; it may just be a quality of silence that, nevertheless, 'speaks' to us with the character of address. But whether it reaches us as an audition ('Samuel, Samuel ...') or as a silence to which we find ourselves summoned to attend, the possibility of the inner dialogue with God depends, crucially, on our being called. In other words, if this is to be indeed a dialogue with God and not simply a way of shielding ourselves from the horror of the elemental noise of an entirely indifferent universe, the word cannot come from nowhere. It must—even if only in

[22] Kierkegaard, *Lilien paa Marken*, p. 24.
[23] Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1973), p. 112.

the mode of silence—be spoken. And, no less importantly, we must know how to listen so as to hear it

Yet, as some of what we have heard from Kierkegaard implies, none of this is simply a matter of personal preference or self-cultivation. Our capacity for language and our relation to silence are matters in which we find ourselves orientated if not determined by the overall character of the age in which we live. As children of an age of chatter, our ability to listen is likely to be severely atrophied. Even if God is speaking, we may not be able to hear. It is this logic that drives Kierkegaard's idea of faith in the direction of a radically individualized act, separating believers from their contemporaries and making what they say about faith incomprehensible to them. Can we, then, find a model that does not require such radical separation? Can we experience ourselves as radically called but also, in our calling, called not only to share but also to transform the destiny of our generation?

It is in search of such a model that we turn now to Heidegger, who, I think offers a number of crucial insights into the idea of calling but also into the complex of issues around human existence, nature, language and God—although it is crucial to Heidegger's conception of philosophy that these insights come in the form of a still more radical questioning and not as answers.

The notion of *call* or *calling* is in fact a persistent theme in Heidegger's thinking, from long before *Being and Time* and on into his later, post–World War II thinking. Let us hear again a passage from one of the letters to Elfride, from 1918:

> Instead of leading to a pure, empty 'I' the whole problem of the 'I' leads to the fulfilled and primordially living ['I'] and its constituent elements – the fulfilling of values grounded in essential openness to value, pointing back to the essence of personal Spirit that I have apprehended as 'Vocation' (*Berufung*) – only so do the eternal properties of the Spirit and their absolute confusion become conceivable – it is along these lines that the problems upon which I have hit while out here are moving, the carrying through of the principle of the historical consciousness – …[24]

In the following years phrases such as 'the essence of eternal Spirit' and 'the eternal properties of the Spirit' disappear from Heidegger's vocabulary and have no role in *Being and Time*. Yet the notion of vocation, of the 'I' as primordially 'called' remains and comes to play a central and abiding role, most obviously in the discussion of conscience in *Being and Time* as well as in his later development.

[24] G. Heidegger (ed.), *"Mein liebes Seelchen!" Briefe Martin Heideggers an seine Frau Elfride 1915–1970* (Munich: Deutsche-Verlags-Anstalt, 2005), p. 87.

But, as Heidegger himself asks, *who* exactly is it that calls when we feel ourselves called by conscience? On some theological and philosophical accounts it might be the voice of God or of reason, my 'true self' that invisibly presides over my every action. For Heidegger, however, God has been methodologically ruled out and, insofar as he might be prepared to talk of a 'true self' at all in *Being and Time*, this could only be the self that I am called, in conscience, to become – not an 'essential' self that somehow already exists in some ideal or metaphysical dimension of my being. That is to say, it is not so much the self that I *am* (present tense) but more the self that I am not-yet but must first become through resolutely running towards death. So who or what calls? His answer: '"It" calls, against our expectations and even against our will …. The call comes from me and yet from beyond me.'[25] And, as he elaborates,

> The caller is Dasein in its state of homelessness: primordial, thrown Being-in-the-world as the "not-at-home" – the bare 'that-it-is' in the 'nothing' of the world. The caller is unfamiliar to the everyday they–self; it is something like an *alien* voice. What could be more alien to the "they", lost in the manifold 'world' of its concern, than the self which has been individualized down to itself in its state of homelessness and thrown into the "nothing"? [26]

What 'calls' is the bare realization of the utter destitution, ontological homelessness, and solitude of the self as thrown towards death. What calls, in other words, is, simply, the truth of the human condition, when all the pleasant or terrifying masks of average everydayness have been stripped away. This is what we are called to see and it is in the light of this truth that we are 'called' to live. But, in this case, 'calling' is, in the end, a mere metaphor and, it seems, we have not really advanced beyond the position of Kierkegaard's aesthete: deep down the world does not reveal itself in word but in elemental noise that we only interpret, for our own use and our own purposes, as word. But is this Heidegger's own final word?

From the early 1930s onwards the idea of the poetic and the figure of the poet, above all the poet Friedrich Hölderlin, become recurrent foci in Heidegger's thinking. Distancing his own understanding of the poetic from contemporary ideas about how the creative artist 'expresses' *deep* inner experiences,[27] Heidegger looks for the essence of the poetic in the nature of the poetic word. Heidegger's poet is the one in whose word the essence of language

[25] M. Heidegger, Sein und Zeit (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1993), p. 275; E. trans. E. Robinson and J. Macquarrie, *Being and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), p. 320.
[26] Heidegger, *Sein un Zeit*, p. 277/ *Being and Time*, pp. 321-2.
[27] See my *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to the Later Heidegger* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 78–83.

(*Sprache*) is pre-eminently manifest and therefore also the one in whose word the being of human being is itself revealed in a distinctive and eminent degree. However, this is not the result of anything subjective or some innate genius but results from the poet having been gripped by the encompassing power of beings themselves. Versus Romanticism, the poet is not a 'creator' but exists poetically as one who is *called*.

The structure and implications of such poetic calling are especially clearly developed in Heidegger's 1942 lectures on Hölderlin's poem 'The Ister' (from the Greek name for the lower Danube, *Istros*). The poem opens with the poet's invocation to the rising sun: 'Now come, Fire!/ We are desirous/ Of seeing the day'. Heidegger immediately draws attention to the meaning of the call articulated in these few simple words. '[T]his calling', he says, 'is different from the issuing of any high-handed summons or command'[28] since

> The call simultaneously calls upon that which is called, such invocation attesting to the dignity of that which is called upon. Here that which is to come comes of its own accord. It is not the call that first moves that which is coming to its coming. Yet if 'the fire' comes of its own accord, then why is it called? The call does not effect the coming. Yet it calls something to that which is coming. What does it call to it?[29]

In answer to this question Heidegger directs us to the second and third lines of the poem ('We are desirous/ Of seeing the day'), in which the poet speaks of his and his audience's desire to see the coming day. Heidegger interprets this in the sense of the poet speaking on behalf of or as the voice of those who await the coming of the sun to say that they are now ready. But, he adds, they are ready 'only because [they] are called by the coming fire itself'. That is to say, their readiness to greet the day is not a spontaneous manifestation of their inner life but is possible only because they know themselves *called* to welcome the day, 'called by the coming fire itself'. Consequently, 'the ones calling here are those who are called, those who are called upon … those summoned to hear because they are of such a vocation'[30] – that is, the vocation of the poetic word itself. 'Only those called to a calling can truly call: "come". And this calling that is called alone has a proper necessity to it'. And, as such, 'This call remains infinitely distinct from what we name a blindly uttered cry'.[31] Such a poetic calling, in which we are called so as to become capable of calling upon, is paradigmatic for the primordial event of the arising of language as distinct from the

[28] M. Heidegger, *Hölderlins Hymne "Der Ister". Gesamtausgabe,* vol. 53 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1993 [2nd ed.]), pp. 5-6; E., trans. W. McNeill and J. Davis, *Hölderlin's Hymn 'The Ister'* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 6.
[29] Heidegger, *"Der Ister"*, pp. 5-6; E. trans. p. 6.
[30] Heidegger, *"Der Ister"*, p. 6; E. trans., p. 7.
[31] Heidegger, *"Der Ister"*, p. 7; E. trans., p. 8.

utterance of a mere cry. But such an arising of language is in turn inseparable from the event of the arising of the human: in the moment in which the cry becomes a word, the animal becomes human. As Heidegger's closing pages emphasize, the poet is therefore the one who, through his word, creates a place for human dwelling on earth.[32] But although the poet and the poetic word thus acquire a privileged status in Heidegger's thought, it is important to emphasize again that what is revealed in poetic discourse is the power of the word as such, that is, the power that brings human being itself into the light of self-awareness and, in doing so, makes us truly human – 'us' as in 'all of us' and not just the privileged creator-self of Fichtean Romanticism.

The philosophical point that language demands our being able to listen to what calls to us from beyond our subjective 'I' is developed more formally in the 1957 lecture on 'The Principle of Identity', where, rejecting the Fichtean formulation of the principle of the identity of thought and being, A=A, Heidegger argues that, nevertheless, human thinking *belongs* to being and does so precisely by virtue of our capacity to listen to being and thus to *hear* it. Heidegger's move here – from identity to belonging – is predicated on the metaphoric (but not merely metaphoric) force of the German word translated here as 'to belong', *gehören*, incorporating the verb *hören*, to hear. Human beings belong to being by hearing it. The following passage from the lecture merits being read against the background of the commentary on poetic vocation in 'The Ister':

> To 'belong' [to be one who listens] here still means to be in the order of Being. But man's distinctive feature lies in this, that he, as one who thinks, is open to Being, face to face with being; thus man remains referred to being and so answers to [literally: 'speaks out from' or 'cor*responds* to': *entspricht*] Being, and he is only this. This 'only' does not mean a limitation, but rather an excess. A belonging to Being prevails within man, a belonging which listens to Being because it is appropriated to Being.[33]

But how does this relate to the question as to whether, deep down, being is to be characterized by elemental noise or is truly revealed for what and as it is in the word? In *Being and Time*, it seemed that all that called was, in the end, death, and the question of death continues to provide a measure of Heidegger's understanding of the human, even if his later thought develops this very differently and more poetically than in *Being and Time.*

[32] Heidegger, *"Der Ister"*, pp. 182ff.; E. trans. pp. 126ff.
[33] M. Heidegger, *Identität und Differenz. Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 11 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2006 [2nd ed.]), p. 39; E. trans. J. Stambaugh, *Identity and Difference*, trans. J. Stambaugh ([Dual language edition] New York: Harper and Row, 1969), pp. 31, 94.

A clear example of this is in the *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1935), in which Heidegger addresses the question of being under a sequence of headings: being and becoming, being and appearance, being and thinking, and being and 'the ought'. In the section on being and thinking, he takes his listeners back to the first chorus from Sophocles' *Antigone*, a poetic reflection on the mystery of human existence. In one widely used English translation this opens with the lines 'Wonders are many on earth, and the greatest of these is man'.[34] Heidegger's own translation strikes a rather different tone: 'Manifold is the uncanny [*Unheimliche*]; yet nothing more uncanny bestirs itself with greater fury than the human'.[35] Heidegger's 'uncanny' echoes what we have already heard from *Being and Time* about the uncanniness of human existence in its thrownness towards death. Human existence is uncanny/*unheimlich* because it lacks a sense of being at home, in the specific sense that human beings are ontologically homeless in the world and have neither a 'home' nor an abiding dwelling on earth. So too here. It is precisely the *dis*location of human existence that Heidegger hears in Sophocles' poem, as it describes human beings' ability to transcend any purely given environment, subordinating the earth, traversing land and sea, mastering the animal world. But, both in the poem and in Heidegger's interpretation, this 'uncanny' power is exemplified not only in human beings' physical dominion over the earth but also, pre-eminently, in the human capacity for language. Although we may have dominion over ocean, earth, and animal, we would never be conscious of what this dominion meant and we would never know the ocean *as* ocean, the earth *as* earth, or the animal *as* animal without 'the powers of language, understanding, attunement and building'. In other words, these latter powers (bestowed in and through language) are themselves the conditions of our wider dominion over the earth. This leads Heidegger to speak of poetic discourse as an 'exercise of force' (*Gewalttätigkeit* – which we could also translate as 'violence'), which he explains as the 'binding and connecting of the forces by means of which beings disclose themselves as such when human beings step forward into their domain'.[36] Human beings' homelessness, their not being bound to any one place or any one environment, is also their power to reach out in action and understanding to any possible earthly environment. Uprooted from their place in 'nature' their 'uncanny' power seems to know no natural boundaries.

[34] Sophocles, *The Theban Plays*, trans. E.F. Watling (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1947), p. 148.
[35] M. Heidegger, *Einführung in die Metaphysik. Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 40 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1983), p. 155.
[36] Heidegger, *Einführung*, p. 166.

'There is just one thing with regard to which their exercise of power is immediately frustrated' however.[37] And that, as Sophocles' poem reminds us and Heidegger repeats, is death. But this is not an accidental feature of our existence nor even just a boundary at which we will arrive one day in the future. 'Human beings are not only faced ineluctably by death when the time comes for them to die, but constantly and essentially', Heidegger says.[38] 'Insofar as human beings *are*, they stand in relation to the ineluctability of death. Thus [human] being-there [Da-sein] is the happening of the un-canny [*Un-heimlichkeit*] itself …. In naming this power and this uncanniness the poetic word projects their proper boundaries to being and to the essence of being human'.[39] Human beings, sovereign over everything else, are not sovereign over death. But, when it is uttered in the poetic word (or, perhaps more precisely, *as* a poetic word), death ceases to be a mere contingency affecting us from outside; even the boundary that death sets to life can then become a human 'project'. This is because in the poetic word, which is the Ur-word of human language as such, we can 'speak' death and represent it in and as a human *logos*. Even as setting a limit to all human power, death becomes, through the poetic word, a human, humanizing, and humanized event.

We return to Hölderlin and the question of poetic vocation. One – of several – passages that Heidegger sees as especially focussing the essence of the poetic vocation is from the poem 'As on a Feast-Day' (here in a prose translation): 'Yet to us, Oh poets, is due the task of standing with uncovered heads beneath God's thunder, taking in our hands the Father's own ray, that very one, and offering the heavenly gift to the people, enclosed in song'. As Heidegger comments, 'The poet forces and binds the divine lightning in a word and places this word, burdened with lightning, into the language of his people'.[40]

This reveals a further dimension of the understanding of poetic vocation that we encountered in 'The Ister'. There it was the rising sun that 'called' the poet to readiness; now it is the divine thunder and lightning. In these, as in other examples, the poetic task is intimately connected with the human mediation of nature. Nor is it coincidental in this connection that several of Heidegger's lecture series focus on poems invoking the German land and the great rivers, the Rhine and the Danube, that moulded the land so as to make it a place in which the wandering Germanic tribes might dwell. The 'divinity' that speaks in the thunder and lightning is the divinity of the super-human powers manifest in the Alpine storms

[37] Heidegger, *Einführung*, p. 167.
[38] Heidegger, *Einführung*, p. 167.
[39] Heidegger, *Einführung*, p. 167.
[40] Heidegger, '*Hölderlins Hymnen "Germanien" und "Der Rhein"*. *Gesamtausgabe*, Vol. 39 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann 1989), p. 30.

that generate the torrents and lakes from which the great German rivers flow forth and that, in turn, form the earth into a habitable land for mortal dwelling – although, as Heidegger consistently emphasizes, it is only in the poetic naming of these powers that mortal dwelling becomes genuinely human. But, this all the more sharpens the question: *who* then calls in the calling? If we name thunder, lightning, and sun as divine or semi-divine powers, does that of itself make them a 'who'? And for us moderns, who, as Heidegger also emphasizes (and precisely with reference to Hölderlin), have experienced the flight of the gods, does it really make any difference if we name these powers Zeus or Apollo? Is this not, dare we say, a 'merely poetical' way of speaking of indifferent worldly powers that, in Matthew Arnold's words, have 'really neither joy, nor love, nor light,/ Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain', i.e., elemental noise.[41]

The intertwining of speech, silence, and suffering is revisited by Heidegger in his 1950 lecture 'Language' (*Die Sprache*). This time, the text is Georg Trakl's poem 'On a Winter Evening'. The poem evokes a scene in which, on a snowy winter's evening, as the vesper bell rings, a wanderer arrives at a well-lit house in which bread and wine are laid out on the table. Expounding the poem line by line, Heidegger comes to the words 'Pain turned the threshold to stone' ('*Schmerz versteinerte die Schwelle*'), which, he says, enunciate the meaning of the poem as a whole. Why? Because the threshold is the dividing line between outside and inside, between the cold winter night and the welcoming brightness of the house with its simple yet festally decked table. 'The threshold bears the "between"', Heidegger writes.[42] But what does this mean and what does it have to do with pain?

Paraphrasing Heidegger, I suggest that his argument is as follows. Human beings exist in the world as conscious of their distinction from their environment, which can also be experienced as not being at home in it. This not-being-at-home in the world is itself an expression of the anxious realization of being thrown towards death and, right from the beginning of their lives, human beings are aware of themselves as being thrown beyond their world into annihilation. The threshold that separates the warmth and luminosity of the home from the cold night outside is thus essentially ambivalent. On the one hand, it offers those wandering in the night the possibility of welcome and it is precisely at the threshold, Heidegger says, that the 'pure brightness' of this welcome shines forth. Yet the threshold also marks the fact that the home is only a local and provisional possibility within the

[41] Quoted from M. Arnold, 'Dover Beach' in M. Allott (ed.), *Matthew Arnold* (Oxford: Oxford University Press [Oxford Poetry Library], 1995, lines 33–4.
[42] M. Heidegger, *Unterwegs zur Sprache. Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 12 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1985). p. 24.

encompassing night. For every 'inside' there is also an 'outside'. Recognition of the threshold is thus also recollection of the ultimate limitations of the human situation. To put it at its simplest, no matter how deeply 'at home' we are in our world, the threshold is a constant reminder that a time will come when we will be carried over it for the last time, 'feet first'. Yet even in the face of this 'ownmost possibility' of death the pure light of welcome spoken in the word, in *this* poetic word, summons our world and the things that compose it into their actual and specific form, giving us a world in which we can dwell. Bringing the turbulence of our world to rest, it gathers its manifold competing elements into articulate speech. But what in this way it calls to presence is what is otherwise unspoken, that is, what is essentially silent. So, in a much-quoted statement, Heidegger writes that 'Language speaks as the re-sonance of silence' ('*das Geläut der Stille*').[43] And, 'Only in so far as human beings belong within the re-sonance of silence, are mortals capable, in their fashion, of resonant speech'.[44]

But does any of this suggest to us that there is some*one* who calls in this 'calling'? As when considering the silent call of conscience, the question inevitably arises as to whether there really is anything that 'calls' other than the compelling vision of our own mortality. Isn't even poetic speaking – and perhaps especially poetic speaking – therefore also speaking that bears within itself and knows the pain of finitude *and nothing more*? And isn't this still the case even if, qua poetry, it also bestows on that pain a form that enables us to bear it and even, as it is said, 'rise above it'? But no matter how 'poetic', isn't this, in the end, an essentially tragic view of life – even if it can inculcate in those who embrace it a certain quiet reverence for Being? Is it ultimately anything more than an ennobling of the animal fear of death by confronting it and saying 'Yes' to it? Such poetic Yea-saying may bestow a certain dignity on our vanishing existence, but to the question 'What am I?' does it really offer any other answer than the answer that Tennyson's 'In Memoriam' sets out to refute: 'An infant crying in the night:/ An infant crying for the light:/ And with no language but a cry'?

A philosophy that neither claims nor calls upon religious faith may be content to humble itself under such self-knowledge and this is certainly not a contemptible position.[45] However, a Christian view of life will also want to speak of another possibility. For if Heidegger is right and we exist by virtue of a certain calling, we have to ask whether this can

[43] M. Heidegger, *Unterwegs zur Sprache* p. 27.
[44] M. Heidegger, *Unterwegs zur Sprache,* p. 28.
[45] James Demske points out that Sophoclean tragedy to which Heidegger appeals also offers a poetic understanding of death that is without religious consolation but does articulate a sense of reverence for Being. See James M. Demske, *Sein, Mensch und Tod. Der Todesproblem bei Martin Heidegger* (Freiburg/Munich: Karl Alber, 1963), pp. 116-17). See also the concluding comment of G. Steiner's *Heidegger* (London: Fontana, 1978), p. 150: 'There are meaner metaphors to live by'.

this make any sense except on the basis of believing that we are called by one who is in some sense a personal being and, as such and only as such, is able to call us by name. This is equally true if we think of the call as admonishing ('Adam, where art thou?'), as summoning to service ('Samuel! Samuel!'), or as the call to worship ('Hear, O Israel')? How can we be *called* unless there is one who *calls*, unless there is a 'who' and not just an 'It'? But whether with regard to the call of conscience or the divine thunder, Heidegger's construal of the source of the call cannot be envisaged as a 'who'. I have argued that Heidegger's 'god' is not a god who speaks but a god who thunders and whose voice must be translated from a realm beyond that of humanity and human speech into the language of articulate discourse. And if the Hebrew Bible also speaks of a God who speaks in the thunder and the whirlwind, it never speaks of the thunder and the whirlwind as constituting the divine voice but only ever as that in which and out of which the divine voice speaks.

Of course, I do not imagine that in this paper I have justified the claim that the human God-relationship is indeed based on a divine call rather than being an invention of the pathetic fallacy. What I do hope to have done is to show how the phenomenological analyses of human existence by Kierkegaard and Heidegger show the meaningfulness of regarding human beings as hearers of the Word. This does not bring with it the claim as to any immediate intuition regarding the ultimately personal character of reality but, precisely as language, calls us to to the responsibility of judgement. In this judgement we do not establish the truth about ourselves by asking 'What is out there?' but, instead, 'Who is calling?'